

# Life's Brief Cruise in the Perilous Ocean of Saṃsāra

London / East B.C.C

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

It is quite customary for the Indians to look upon man's ceaseless life process as a journey through a vast extensive ocean which they describe as *ogha* or *aṇṇava* [Skt. *arṇava*]. Note such references as *Katham su tarati ogham katham su tarati aṇṇavam* [= How does one cross the mighty flood. How does one cross the vast ocean?]. This statement occurs in the Ālavaka Sutta of the Suttanipāta: Sn. v. In the Upanishads, they speak of this as journeying from death to death: *mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyuṃ āpnoti*

Judeo-Christian traditions which uphold the theory of creation by a single individual power or person whom they choose to call God Almighty, maintain that human life terminates at death and thereupon falls back on the mercy of the creator for judgement as deserving heaven or hell in return for the good or bad lives lived on earth. Indians on the other hand, and Buddhists in particular, believe in the trans-migratory continuance of life through birth, death and birth, again and again, in what they call the ocean of *Saṃsāra*. Rewards for the pattern of life lived here on earth as humans, with their own self-inherited personal power of judgement [*manassa ussannatāya manussā*], depend on the life-prolonging or life-reducing nature of activity or *kamma* [Skt. *karman*], intentionally and conscientiously indulged in, in the process of living as humans.

It is the quality of action of humans, i.e. their behavioral pattern, as being wholesome or unwholesome [as being *puṇya* or *pāpa*, i.e. *pin pav* in Sinhala] which makes a human good or bad. The Upanishads put it as *puṇyena vai karmanā puṇyo bhavati pāpaḥ pāpena iti*. The Buddhist books have it as *attanā'va kataṃ pāpaṃ attanā saṅkilissati attanā akataṃ pāpaṃ attanā'va visujjhati*. Buddhists further elaborate this theory of action or *kamma* as having its

genesis in what they call three bases or roots of evil, namely greed, hatred and delusion [i.e. *lobha dosa moha*]. This clarifies the basic Buddhist position that the thought and activity pattern of humans is essentially founded on the two polarized processes of the human mind, namely of being attracted to and being repelled by stimuli received from the external world. Buddhist texts emphatically present this process as *anurodha + virodham samāpanno*. That is being caught up in a continuous process of submission and resistance. For certain, it is this kind of *kamma*, generated through these roots of evil or *akusala-mūla* which sustains every individual's continuance in *saṃsāra*. Consequently, Nirvana or the termination of each individual's *saṃsāric* continuance is referred to as *kamma-nirodha* and the path leading to it, namely Noble Eight-fold Path logically as the *kamma-nirodha-gaminī-paṭipadā*.

Buddhism unhesitatingly refers to this *saṃsāric* journey in these following words. *Anamatagg'āyaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā-nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhā-saṃyojanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃvarataṃ* [= Endless is this *saṃsāric* process whose first beginnings are not discernible where beings, wrapped up in ignorance and tied up with craving, keep cruising and racing]. At least a few aspects of this devastating *saṃsāric* typhoon in which humans are caught up are revealed through words like *anamataggo* [= infinitely vast], *avijjā-nīvaraṇānaṃ* [= wrapped up in ignorance] and *taṇhā-saṃyojanānaṃ* [= tied up with craving]. Whatever be its nature, acceptable or otherwise, *saṃsāra* is infinitely vast. It is also sustained and kept continuously going through our own errors of thinking and acting.

The ability to assess and evaluate correctly life in *saṃsāra* is admittedly a rare gift. It delights every one of us to know how young Siddhartha, prior to his enlightenment, while he was still aspiring for Buddhahood, had his first glimpse of this. Mark these words 'prior to my enlightenment' and 'while I was still aspiring for Buddhahood'. This gift of pre-enlightenment vision and subsequent conviction is indeed unique. But the capacity for it had to be there, developed we believe

through *saṃsāric* culture. Young Siddhartha, as the Buddha aspirant, was mature enough to assess it precisely, while he was still in the household. Life in the world, he said, was menacingly painful: *kicchaṃ vatā'yaṃ loko āpanno*.

What is it that makes it painful? It is indeed none other than the very phenomenon of life, of being born, of growing up and maturing into adulthood, coupled with accompanying disease and decay, and finally ending in death: *jāyati ca jīyati ca mīyati ca cavati ca uppajjati ca*. Note clearly here the last two words in the statement, namely *cavati ca uppajjati ca*. They bring before the Buddhist two vital and inescapable concepts, namely the passage or passing over from one state of existence to another, i.e. *cavati* and being born again in another, i.e. *uppajjati ca*. Buddhist teachings give enough warnings to its adherents about perils of life from birth to death as well as what awaits a *saṃsāric* being beyond death: *kāyassa bhedaṃ param-maraṇā*. What is possible beyond death is to be viewed as being more real than a mere threat. It is the possible descent into states of existence lower than human [*apāya* = *apa* + *aya* and *niraya* = *nir* + *aya*]. The return back from these to a state of a human once again is declared to be only remotely possible.

Thus it becomes abundantly clear that the challenge of Buddhism is to take the bull by the horns, i.e. to reject any further continuance in *Saṃsāra* from this very moment and opt for the termination, without any delay, of the continuance of the *saṃsāric* process, in any form of existence.

27.05.06